

“Strangers and Pilgrims on the Earth”

BARRY M. WILLARDSON

Today is July 14. For most it is just another hot summer day, but for those with French connections it is La Fête Nationale, the day that France celebrates its independence. Every July 14 I am reminded of my missionary service in France and Belgium years ago. One July 14 my missionary companions and I watched from the port of Calais as fireworks burst over the English Channel in beautiful celebration of French freedom. This was a wonderful time for me—the last summer months of my mission among a people I had come to love and with whom I had labored to build faith and trust in God. Their faith had been terribly challenged by the ravages of war and other events, but some received the message of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ and have been greatly blessed by its teachings.

Faith in God our Father and His Son Jesus Christ is a powerful force that moves souls and nations to look to the heavens for understanding of the purpose of life on earth. For me, some of the most inspiring verses of scripture are those that enumerate the exploits of the faithful, as in Hebrews 11 of the New Testament and Ether 12 of the Book of Mormon.

In Ether, Moroni told us that

*faith is things which are hoped for and not seen; wherefore, dispute not because ye see not, for ye receive no witness until after the trial of your faith.*¹

He then reminded us of the immovable faith of Alma and Amulek, Ammon and his brethren, Helaman’s sons Nephi and Lehi, and the brother of Jared.

In Hebrews 11, the apostle Paul wrote of the faith of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Sara. Of Abraham and Sara, Paul stated:

*By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went.*²

Paul continued:

Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised.

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*Therefore sprang there even of one, and him as good as dead, so many as the stars of the sky in multitude, and as the sand which is by the sea shore innumerable.*³

Then, referring to all these noble souls, Paul made a statement that captures our attention:

*These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.*⁴

What was Paul teaching us in this passage? Was he saying that these great ones understood that this earth was not their home but rather a stopover on their way through the eternities?

This is one of the compelling questions of mankind. Are we truly strangers and pilgrims on the earth and is there more to our existence than meets the eye? Here we live on this small but beautiful blue planet. We each make our way through life doing what we want or what others convince us to do, but what is the purpose of it all?

My background is in the sciences, and scientists seek to understand the great questions of life by making observations. One of the most inspiring scientific endeavors of our time has been the exploration of our universe through the Hubble Space Telescope. Although I have no expertise in astrophysics, the subject fascinates me, probably as a result of watching too many episodes of *Star Trek* as a boy.

This year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of Hubble's launch. During those twenty-five years, a nearly constant stream of data has been coming from Hubble that has taught us much. One experiment, called the Hubble eXtreme Deep Field,⁵ focused the telescope on a small region of the sky apparently devoid of stars and collected light at different times over a ten-year period, logging more than 500

hours. To get an idea of the size of this small area, it is roughly equivalent to what you would see if you looked into the sky through an eight-foot-long soda straw.⁶ The Hubble images showed that this region was not devoid of stars at all but contained 5,500 galaxies, averaging about 100 billion stars each.⁷ The light from the most distant galaxies had been traveling for about 13.2 billion years before being collected by Hubble.⁸

From these data, astronomers have estimated that there are 200 billion galaxies in the universe with an average of 100 billion stars per galaxy. Doing the math gives two-times-10²² stars in the universe—an absolutely mind-boggling number.⁹ By measuring the distance to these galaxies and how quickly they are moving away from us and by combining this data with other observations of the early universe, astrophysicists have calculated that the universe is about 13.7 billion years old and is growing in size at a faster and faster rate.¹⁰ For this accelerated expansion to be possible, about 70 percent of the universe must be something astronomers term “dark energy”¹¹ because we don't know what it is. For me, the grandeur of it all is eloquently captured by the words and music of our opening hymn, “If You Could Hie to Kolob.”¹² When William W. Phelps penned the words of the hymn, he did not have the vision of the Hubble telescope, but he had the vision of Joseph Smith, and Joseph had the vision of God.

So how and why did all of this come to be and where do we fit in this great expanse of space? Science struggles to address these questions. However, there are other very important ways to learn truth. The apostle Paul taught in writing to the Corinthians, “For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God.”¹³ Paul continued, “But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know

them, because they are spiritually discerned.”¹⁴ Thus God can reveal His existence, purposes, and truths to us by spiritual means that are just as real as physical scientific observations. This is what happened to Moses on the mountain.

Millennia before the Hubble telescope, God spoke with Moses face-to-face and gave him a view of His creations. This experience is recorded in Moses 1 of the Pearl of Great Price:

*And it came to pass that Moses looked, and beheld the world upon which he was created; and Moses beheld the world and the ends thereof, and all the children of men which are, and which were created; of the same he greatly marveled and wondered.*¹⁵

In response to this experience, Moses exclaimed:

*Now, for this cause I know that man is nothing, which thing I never had supposed.*¹⁶

Perhaps we also feel a sense of insignificance when attempting to fathom the vastness of creation. However, later in this revelation God taught Moses the purpose of His creations:

And the Lord God spake unto Moses, saying: The heavens, they are many, and they cannot be numbered unto man; but they are numbered unto me, for they are mine.

And as one earth shall pass away, and the heavens thereof even so shall another come; and there is no end to my works, neither to my words.

*For behold, this is my work and my glory— to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man.*¹⁷

In this transcendent passage God revealed that the purpose of this vast creation is for us, for our happiness, and for our eternal progression.

So where were we during this marvelous creation? The Lord asked Job this same question:

Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? . . .

*When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?*¹⁸

One of the most essential truths of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ is that we are spirit children of the great Creator Himself, and we call Him Father because that is our true relationship to Him.¹⁹ Knowing this relationship explains why He created all these things for us. Prior to our life here on earth we lived with Him,²⁰ and we were present and witnessed our earth’s creation and shouted for joy because of it! This is why we truly are strangers and pilgrims on the earth.

For me, one of the most beautiful expressions of this truth was penned by the poet William Wordsworth. He came to an understanding of this truth without hearing the message of the restored gospel. He wrote:

*Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The soul that rises with us, our life’s star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home.*²¹

So if we have come from God, then why are we here? On occasion it seems like it might have been better to just stay put. Living with our Father in Heaven must have been wonderful, so why go to the trouble? This thought reminds me of something my father-in-law, Jean Marichal, would often quip in his native French language, exclaiming, “*Qui m’a poussé dedans?*” which, translated, means, “Who pushed me in?” He would say this mostly, but not entirely, in jest. The answer to why we are here was revealed clearly to Abraham, as recorded in the Pearl of Great Price:

Now the Lord had shown unto me, Abraham, the intelligences that were organized before the world was; and among all these there were many of the noble and great ones;

And God saw these souls that they were good, and he stood in the midst of them, and he said: These I will make my rulers; for he stood among those that were spirits, and he saw that they were good; and he said unto me: Abraham, thou art one of them; thou wast chosen before thou wast born.

And there stood one among them that was like unto God, and he said unto those who were with him: We will go down, for there is space there, and we will take of these materials, and we will make an earth whereon these may dwell;

And we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them;

And they who keep their first estate shall be added upon; and they who keep not their first estate shall not have glory in the same kingdom with those who keep their first estate; and they who keep their second estate shall have glory added upon their heads for ever and ever.²²

Herein lies the answer to the great question of the purpose of life. We are here to learn to trust in God to the point that we do whatever He asks, and in so doing we become as He is.

It seems to me that the most important thing we can do in life is to find out if this really is true: that God is our Father, that we are strangers and pilgrims on the earth, and that we are here to become like our Father. So how do we come to this knowledge? The process begins by hearing of these things from those who know.²³ That is why we send missionaries throughout the world. My youngest daughter, Eva, is currently one of those missionaries, serving on Réunion and Mauritius, which are islands in the Indian Ocean—about as far away from here as is physically possible on earth. Many of you were in similar situations as missionaries, and perhaps some of you are here today because your hearts burned as the

missionaries taught you of your divine origins and the purpose of life.

Hearing and pondering these things will lead us to pray, and through prayer our Father can tell us Himself that He is there and we are His children. Let me share an experience with you.

While serving as a missionary in France, not long after the July 14 celebration I referred to earlier, my companion and I had spent the day working with the other missionaries in the city of Nancy. We were scheduled to travel that night to Strasbourg, about a two-hour drive away on the German border. I had returned in the evening with the missionary I was with and was waiting in the apartment for my companion to return.

My companion and the other missionary finally arrived a little after 10 p.m., apologizing for the late hour and explaining that they had been in a spirited discussion with an atheist who was trying to convince them of the error of their ways. We quickly packed our things and got on the road. While driving, my companion talked about the conversation with the atheist.

The arguments were all too familiar to me. God may exist, but there is no way to know for sure. And if He does exist, then He doesn't care about us or He would have stopped the terrible events in the world. Furthermore, our belief in God was a deception that made us feel better about our lives, but the reality was that when we died, there was nothing.

We talked about these issues and about how difficult it is for such a person to even want to know the reality of God. For some reason my companion's encounter left me perturbed, not because I was shaken by the arguments—for I had heard them many times—but because I was wearied by the unbelief of these people among whom I had spent so much time and whom I had come to care about.

I remember looking up into the night sky as we drove on and seeing it filled with stars.

We almost never saw the stars because they were obscured by the city lights or by clouds. However, we were now far from the city, traveling through the Vosges Mountains, and the skies were clear. As I gazed upon the night sky, I had this overwhelming impression that God was in His heaven and was in control. I commented on this to my companion, wondering how anyone could look up into the night sky and not feel the same thing.

I was in this same state of mind when we arrived in Strasbourg around midnight. We apologized to our missionary hosts for the late arrival and laid out our bedding, which consisted of a foam pad and a sleeping bag for each of us on the floor. I knelt on mine to pray, as was my nightly routine. However, this prayer turned out to be anything but routine. As I prayed, I thought of the events and emotions of that night, and I pleaded, "Dear Father, I need to know if you are really there if I am going to continue in this work among such an unbelieving people."

As soon as that phrase formed in my mind, I was enveloped by an intense spiritual energy that pulsed through my body from my head to my toes and settled upon me. It was a warm, comforting feeling that stayed with me for a long time. It was the witness of the Holy Spirit to me that God was there and that He had heard my prayer. I finished praying and lay down to sleep, but the feeling would not go away. I lay basking in this powerful yet sweet sensation for some time until it slowly dissipated and I drifted off to sleep.

Since then I have never doubted the existence of God. I know He answered me. More than thirty years later that experience is still vivid in my mind. I do not know how the Spirit of God interfaces with our mortal physiology, but it is powerful and unlike any other emotion. It cannot be explained away.

So once we have come to know our relationship with our Father in Heaven and our purpose in life, then our path is set before us. However, part of the "prove them

herewith" clause of the plan is to stay on the path and never forget the knowledge we have gained. Remembering our origins and purposes is key to our success here on earth. Remembering is one of the important themes in the Book of Mormon. Listen to the words of Helaman to his sons Nephi and Lehi:

And now, my sons, remember, remember that it is upon the rock of our Redeemer, who is Christ, the Son of God, that ye must build your foundation.²⁴

Furthermore, it is for this same purpose that each week we take the sacrament in remembrance of Jesus's sacrifice and promise to "always remember him and keep his commandments."²⁵ Yet sometimes we forget, our vision blurs, and we do not live up to the knowledge we have received.

In such situations, perhaps we can learn something more from the Hubble telescope—not from its amazing images but from its near failure. To the horror of all those involved, when the first images came back from Hubble, they were blurred and out of focus. The shape of Hubble's mirrors were off about one-fiftieth the thickness of a human hair because of a few missing chips of paint that had thrown off the laser-guided measuring tool used to polish the mirrors.²⁶ Many thought that the Hubble telescope would be forever useless.

However, with a herculean effort by NASA scientists and astronauts, correction mirrors were designed and installed in space, removing the aberration. Making the repairs in space was so intricate that the team of astronauts spent twenty months practicing the procedure, with 400 hours underwater to simulate zero gravity, rehearsing on a mock-up of Hubble.²⁷ The repairs proceeded flawlessly, and NASA scientists celebrated in joy and relief when they saw the first crystal-clear images coming from the telescope.²⁸

There is a great lesson to be learned from correcting Hubble's vision. Sometimes small flaws can put our lives out of focus and we cannot

see our divine origins. In such circumstances, our lives need not be scrapped like a piece of interstellar junk, but correcting mirrors can be installed—thanks to something more than a herculean effort that we call the Atonement of Jesus Christ. Jesus was the one who came forward in that Grand Council in Heaven, presenting Himself with the words “Here am I, send me.”²⁹ He was the one who was faithful when facing unimaginable suffering, saying, “Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done.”³⁰ We can trust in Him and in His power to make things right again, and our lives can someday reflect views even more glorious than those from the repaired Hubble telescope.

At some point sooner or later, our time as mortals on this earth will end and we will learn that we were truly strangers and pilgrims here. This fact became devastatingly clear to me eighteen months ago when my younger brother Kendall died suddenly of a heart attack, seemingly in full health and just a few weeks after being released as bishop of his ward. His ward loved him, especially the youth. Professionally, he worked at the hospital in our small town and was similarly loved by the patients and by his coworkers.

Our family was emotionally shaken to its core by this tragedy, but our faith was not. We knew the promises of the Resurrection and had felt the power of the witness of Mary at the open tomb as she turned in hearing Jesus call her name, of the disciples on the road to Emmaus as their hearts burned within them while they conversed unknowingly with the resurrected Lord, of the apostles gathered together in fear and wonder of the events of that first Easter and then in what must have been utter joy as they felt the prints of the nails in His hands and His feet, and of the Nephite multitude as Jesus ministered unto them in power and glory. Jesus has overcome death, and, as a result, so will we.

This tragedy gave me great cause for reflection about my life and how I should spend the rest of my days. It also motivated me to have my physical heart carefully examined. One test was a cardiac perfusion test, in which you walk on a treadmill to get your heart rate up and then you receive an injection with a radioactive tracer. You are placed in a scanner that follows the tracer as it circulates through your heart. During the test you must lie very still under the scanner for some time so as not to disturb the imaging.

As I lay there, I closed my eyes trying to relax, wondering how my heart was performing in this test. Suddenly, without opening my eyes, I saw my brother walk past the scanner. He was dressed in his hospital scrubs, looking young and healthy. He moved past me to the other room where the monitor was showing the results of the scan. In my amazement, my first thought was, “What are you doing here?” and then the realization hit me that he was concerned about my well-being and wanted to know the results of the test. This view was gone in an instant, and I was left to contemplate it. The act was so typical of him, doing what he did in life, caring for others.

From this and many other experiences, I too confess that we are strangers and pilgrims on the earth, that life continues after our mortal bodies fail us, that our loved ones who have gone before know us and are there to help us. Alma declared this truth in saying:

The spirits of all men, as soon as they are departed from this mortal body, yea, the spirits of all men, whether they be good or evil, are taken home to that God who gave them life.

And then shall it come to pass, that the spirits of those who are righteous are received into a state of happiness, which is called paradise, a state of rest, a state of peace, where they shall rest from all their troubles and from all care, and sorrow.³¹

I testify that this is so. Let me close with the final words of Brother Phelps's hymn:

*There is no end to glory;
There is no end to love;
There is no end to being;
There is no death above.*³²

May we all live and love and serve to the measure of this knowledge. In the name of Him who makes it all possible, even our Savior Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Ether 12:6.
2. Hebrews 11:8.
3. Hebrews 11:11–12.
4. Hebrews 11:13.
5. See "Hubble Goes to the eXtreme to Assemble Farthest-Ever View of the Universe," National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), nasa.gov/mission_pages/hubble/science/xdf.html.
6. See "The Hubble Space Telescope 'Extreme Deep Field' View," Department of Physics and Astronomy, Georgia State University, hyperphysics.phy-astr.gsu.edu/hbase/astro/xdeepfield.html.
7. See "Invisible Universe Revealed," *Nova*, season 42, episode 18, 2015, pbs.org/wgbh/nova/space/invisible-universe.html; see also "Hubble View" and "Hubble Goes to the eXtreme."
8. See "Hubble Goes to the eXtreme."
9. See "Invisible Universe."
10. See "Invisible Universe"; see also "Dark Energy, Dark Matter," NASA Science, Astrophysics, science.nasa.gov/astrophysics/focus-areas/what-is-dark-energy.
11. "Invisible Universe"; also "Dark Energy."
12. "If You Could Hie to Kolob," *Hymns*, 2002, no. 284.
13. 1 Corinthians 2:11.
14. 1 Corinthians 2:14.
15. Moses 1:8.
16. Moses 1:10.
17. Moses 1:37–39.
18. Job 38:4, 7.
19. See Moses 3:5; Hebrews 12:9.
20. See D&C 138:56.
21. William Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" (1807), stanza 5.
22. Abraham 3:22–26.
23. See Romans 10:17.
24. Helaman 5:12.
25. D&C 20:77.
26. See "Invisible Universe."
27. See "Invisible Universe."
28. See "Invisible Universe."
29. Abraham 3:27.
30. Luke 22:42.
31. Alma 40:11–12.
32. "If You Could Hie to Kolob," verse 5.